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LIMITED WAR THEORY IN VIETNAM: A CRITIQUE ACCORDING TO CLAUSEWITZ
CORE COURSE 2 ESSAY

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Military Strategy
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Summary

America's limited war theory, which provided the intellectual justification and guide for our involvement in Vietnam, suffered from all the flaws which Clausewitz had seen in such abstract approaches to war 130 years earlier. Misled by the apparent rationalist perfection of its theory, U.S. leaders failed to understand that a war of limited objectives and means is only possible when both sides are willing to restrict means. They could not understand this because their theory did not admit the role of passion and will in driving a people's effort in war. This paper will discuss the series of errors in strategic thinking that flowed from this fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of war, and which led to our loss of the Vietnam War.

First, the U.S. did not recognize that the true Clausewitzian "center of gravity" in Vietnam was essentially political: the will of the people to resist the Communist insurgency, a will we could not create or substitute for by military action. We thus chose a military objective - defeat of the North Vietnamese Army - when it became clear that Saigon was losing its grip on the country in 1965.

Second, having engaged the North Vietnamese, U.S. leadership did not understand the role of moral factors in determining the amount of forces which North Vietnam and the Viet Cong would field and which we would have to match. Totally committed to victory in the South, the North Vietnamese continued to up the ante.

Third, the U.S., seeking a military solution to a political

problem, used the military as a political tool rather than directing it to a clear military objective, thereby increasing the cost of the war. Having lost control of the cost of the war, the United States leadership lost the war because it lost the support of the American people.¹ Unlike its government, the people never lost sight of the limited nature of our interests of Vietnam, and of the relation of means to ends.

The judgement of the American people was sound. Our ultimate objective in Vietnam had little to do with Vietnam per se: it mattered to us largely as a test of our policy of global containment.² Global containment was only possible if it could be achieved in each locality with limited means. Had we defeated the Vietnamese Communists at an even more horrendous cost than the price of our defeat, or at the cost of even greater destruction in Vietnam, we would only have demonstrated even more clearly that we could not do it again elsewhere.

America's Limited War Theory

Clausewitz' work is of enduring value because it reflects a wisdom deeply grounded in human experience. "War is ... always the collision of two living forces."³ The men who led the United States deeper and deeper into the Vietnam War were intelligent but devoid of wisdom. They took the nation into conflict on the basis of a limited war theory typical of the "grand simplifications and

¹ Robert E. Osgood, Limited War Revisited (Westview Press, 1979) 40.

² Osgood 34.

³ Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 77.

ingenious strategems of the Kennedy era".⁴ It was an approach produced by an intellectual elite given to abstraction and introspection; a manner of thought vastly different from that of the inquisitive and comprehensive mind that was the mark of military genius for Clausewitz.⁵

"Pity the theory that conflicts with reason!"⁶ As described by Cronin, Clausewitz was chary of abstract, rigid theories of war because: 1) information is subjective and not fixed in war; 2) moral and psychological forces are intertwined with physical forces; and 3) war consists of reciprocal, not unilateral action. Moreover, to paraphrase Clausewitz, theories tend to ignore or assume away chance, and technocratic language often leads to fuzzy thinking that obscures reality.⁷

The limited war theory that was the intellectual foundation for U.S. policy in Vietnam suffered from all these problems to the extreme. It was a theory constructed at the global level, to support our overall policy of containment of the Soviet Union and China. It was intended as a means of avoiding escalation to nuclear war while combatting what we thought was a threat to U.S. security of worldwide Soviet and Chinese aggression through proxy local Communist movements. Conveniently, it also seemed to justify

⁴ Osgood 51.

⁵ Clausewitz 112.

⁶ Clausewitz 136.

⁷ Patrick M. Cronin, "Clausewitz Condensed," Military Review August 1985: 44.

a continued role for conventional armed forces in the nuclear age.⁸ Local conditions mattered only as they related to our global objective.

The French experience in Vietnam was ample evidence of the determination of the Communists and their ability to frustrate the military aims of a great power. Given that will to achieve unification irrespective of cost, limited war between North and South Vietnam was never possible. We had ample evidence of the weakness of purpose and corruption of the Diem regime and its successors well before we committed U.S. ground troops.

Our preference for simple conceptualizations at the global level led us to ignore or assume away all the evidence about the local realities in Vietnam which should have kept us out in the first place or at best would have indicated only a limited and temporary presence. Because we did not know the Vietnamese, we made the cardinal mistakes of underestimating our opponent and overestimating both our ally's abilities and our own powers to influence local events.

Above all, we did not understand that limited war is only possible when both sides agree to limit objectives and means - we thought that the United States, superior in power, culture, and technology, could always achieve its own objectives with the means it chose to bring to bear, and the Vietnamese, passive pieces on a game board, would move to whatever positions we had assigned them.

⁸ Harry G. Summers, On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1981) 28.

We did not understand this fundamental point because our theory obscured the reality that it was national will in support of national objectives which would determine the means both sides would bring to the war.

Centers of Gravity: Vietnamese Will

For the Communists, the Clausewitzian was never the North Vietnamese Army, but was the will of the South Vietnamese to resist the insurgency and invasion from the North. Had active support for the Saigon government and opposition to Communist moral and military action been greater, North Vietnamese, rather than ARVN and American resources, would have been under the greater pressure. Limited participation by the United States in what was never a limited war for the two Vietnamese opponents would only have been possible had South Vietnam been truly a viable state, able to command the support of its own people.

In the Kennedy years, the U.S. military objective in Vietnam - improvement of South Vietnam's military ability to resist insurgency - was consistent with a strategy directed at the true center of gravity and compatible with limited U.S. involvement. Clausewitz counselled that when it becomes apparent that your objectives cannot be achieved with the means chosen, it is time to sue for peace.⁹ When it became clear in 1965 that the South Vietnamese government could not withstand Communist pressure, we did the opposite: we dramatically upped our ante with the introduction of U.S. ground troops and took on the North Vietnamese

⁹ Clausewitz 92.

in a conventional war of attrition. Once we entered conventional war, we lost control of the cost of the war, because the North Vietnamese, far from being passive game pieces, continued to match our force increases in a cycle of escalation which we did not foresee.¹⁰

War Without An Objective

While we increased our stake in Vietnam with the commitment of ground troops, we did not establish a clear military objective for their use. The Communists' total commitment to their cause suggested that nothing short of annihilation and the establishment of an American protectorate in the South could have broken their will to fight. We did not aim at annihilation; neither did we set a more limited objective. Rather, we made decisions on the levels and missions of American air and ground forces based on their assumed value as "signals" intended to move the North Vietnamese to stop fighting and negotiate, an approach drawn from the totally untested precepts of limited war theory.¹¹ Clausewitz said that war is the continuation of policy with other means¹²; he did not say that warmaking is another form of diplomacy. The North Vietnamese probably read "signals" such as the limits on "Rolling Thunder's" targets and our bombing pauses correctly as evidence of our less than total commitment to winning the war.¹³

¹⁰ Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America (The Free Press, 1984) 553.

¹¹ Stephen Peter Rosen, "Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War", International Security Fall 1982: 87-103.

¹² Clauswitz 69.

¹³ Osgood 44.

Disregarding Clausewitz, we also asked the military to perform a mission "foreign to its nature"¹⁴ when we put it in charge of the CORDS nation-building effort. It is highly doubtful that any nation-building effort, however designed and administered, could have succeeded in the face of the corruption and lack of resolve of the South Vietnamese government.¹⁵ The pretension that we could do with a sheaf of "made in the USA" social engineering programs what the South Vietnamese government could not was another fallacy obscured by the technocratic mental sleights of hand of the Kennedy-Johnson era. As one author has suggested, however, the association of punitive military anti-insurgency efforts with at least theoretically positive "pacification" programs lessened the credibility of the latter.¹⁶ Moreover, use of the military for such essentially civilian tasks further obscured the limits of military power for the American people.¹⁷

U.S. conduct of the war without a true military objective, but as an exercise in game theory and social engineering, amounted to a Clausewitzian dispersion of forces and may have increased the American cost over all conceivable alternatives. Our pursuit of these policies obscured the fact that we had lost the initiative in determining costs to the Vietnamese Communists. Our losses would have been least had we understood in 1965 that we could not boost the South Vietnamese willingness to resist the insurgency by enough

¹⁴ Clausewitz 608.

¹⁵ Osgood 39.

¹⁶ Osgood 41.

¹⁷ Chief of Staff Weygand (qtd. in Summers 49-50).

to make the difference, and had cut our losses and gotten out.

Harry G. Summers suggests that without the restrictions imposed on attacks on Communist sanctuaries and on "Rolling Thunder's" targets, we could have defeated North Vietnam militarily with fewer losses than were the price of our eventual defeat.¹⁸ As it happened, the war of attrition ultimately came to demand a level of American troops which could have threatened our ability to defend Europe.¹⁹

Centers of Gravity: The American Will

The 1968 Tet offensive brought home the news to the American people and its leadership that although we continued to score military successes against the Vietnamese Communists, there was no upper limit on the troops and materiel we would have to commit. The judgement of the American people, reached in anguished national debate, was that American interests in defeating Communism in Vietnam did not justify the American troops already committed, much less the scale of involvement which might be required just to continue the war, with no guarantee of victory, should the Communists up the stakes once again. The Vietnamese Communists, by gaining control of the determination of the means the United States would have to commit to a point that the American people withdrew their support for the effort, had won the war without achieving military victory.

Summers argues that the Communists were able to do this

¹⁸ Summers 67-77.

¹⁹ Rosen 98.

because President Johnson, fearful that overt actions to put the United States on a true war footing would have threatened his social policy agenda, deliberately chose not to arouse the passions of the American people, and we fought the war "in cold blood".²⁰ The implications of Summers argument' is that had enmities been aroused the American people would not have put limits on our means.

That argument presupposes that a deliberate policy of stirring the public could have succeeded, and that a Declaration of War would have fixed the public judgement in favor of the war effort irrespective of the development of the war. It is essentially a cynical argument, cynical of the reasonableness of the American people. It would have required convincing the public that the American stakes were greater than they were.

There was in fact little to support a conclusion that the United States would support unlimited means for a limited objective. The strategy of containment had been tested in war only once, in Korea, a highly unpopular war until means were limited and an achievable objective was set in relation to those means. Most of our previous wars had in fact been limited, but had usually been conducted for concrete, limited objectives such as a piece of territory or defense of trade, and had in fact demanded only limited losses. Vietnam would have demanded potentially unlimited losses in support of a yet distant threat to our security.

It is also unclear that the public would have supported a war of near-annihilation against North Vietnam, even in the unlikely

²⁰ Summers 22.

event it could have been won with fewer American losses than ultimately occurred. We have conducted such wars when our national security was not directly and urgently threatened - the Indian wars come to mind - but American societal values and communications technology had changed by the 1960's. Our own enormous casualties and the destruction wrought in pursuit of defeat cost us a great deal in national soul; it is unlikely that the public would have stomached even greater carnage as the price of victory in what was supposed to have been a small war.

National values notwithstanding, the judgement of the American people to limit the means devoted to the Vietnam War reflected a more objective understanding of the importance of the level of cost to our defined goal - support of our global policy of containment - than did the policies of its leaders. If we could have achieved victory in a local war only at substantial national cost or only upon the annihilation of a local enemy, it should have been obvious that we would not have the will or resources to do it anywhere else. The implication was that the entire policy of containment guaranteed by U.S. military might was fatally flawed. This was the judgement drawn by the Soviet Union, China, and local insurgency movements worldwide from our defeat.

Keep It Simple, Stupid

Clausewitz did not say this, but much of his more elegant if tortuous language distills to the same idea. The key conclusion to be drawn from a study of the use of limited war theory in Vietnam is not that limited wars with limited means are not winnable,

because in some instances they are - witness Grenada, or even the Gulf. In any case, the U.S. military achieved many of its operational objectives in Vietnam. The problem was that our interests in Vietnam could not be achieved solely by military objectives. The expenditure of American lives for an unattainable goal represented a failure of leadership at the highest level.

We can win limited wars, but we couldn't do it in Vietnam for reasons particular to Vietnam. The key conclusion is rather that U.S. national strategy, to be effective, must be grounded in a deep understanding of the societies we are trying to influence or oppose, and of the limits of our abilities to influence or oppose. This sounds deceptively simple. Yet we have continued to make mistakes around the world because of a persistent tendency to disregard both local human realities and the limits of our own power in the twenty years that the Vietnam experience has haunted the American consciousness.